

Urban Mission & Ministry Congress

Conference Focuses on Adventist Mission in an Urban World

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(Photo by Shiekainah Decano, University Communication student photographer)

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Some 535 pastors, lay ministry leaders, church planters, community service managers, Bible workers and seminarians gathered September 6–8 at Andrews University for the 2018 Urban Mission and Ministry Congress. The theme was “God’s City, My City—Transforming Community through Christ’s Love,” and the tag line was “Re-set. Re-frame.” Acknowledging the humor of hosting an urban-focused event in the rural setting of Berrien Springs, Michigan, Pastor Jose Cortes Jr. announced jokingly that a country-living event will soon be held two hours away in Chicago.

Dr. Skip Bell, professor of Church Leadership at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and coordinator for the event, shared the meaning of that tag line with Adventist Today. “The words re-set and re-frame suggest change is necessary. We—the Seventh-day Adventist Church—were born in the context of New England, the second wave of the Great Awakening in the mid-nineteenth century, where the issues in Christianity were identified with that historical framework, that point in time.” Despite the need to recognize and value these historical roots, Bell emphatically noted the difference between roots and foundation. “The foundation of our church is not that history. The foundation of our church is Jesus and how He lives in this world today through His church. We are a movement of people empowered by the Spirit, filled with a joyful relationship with Jesus, sharing Him not through argument but through life and deed. So re-set, re-frame.”

Pastor Dan Jackson, president of the Adventist denomination in North America, kicked off the event by stressing the importance of urban ministry. Jackson emphasized the weekend’s

primary theme—the need to serve in the cities rather than distance ourselves from the urban context. “We are called to the cities,” he said, highlighting the Old Testament story of Jonah’s call to share God’s message with Nineveh. Jackson noted that in North America, 63 percent of the population live in cities that account for less than 4 percent of the land mass. Furthermore, while 55 percent of the world’s population now live in urban areas, by 2050 that number is projected to grow to 68 percent. Pastor Tiffany Brown, from REACH Philadelphia, later addressed the same point saying, “Our cities are important because that’s where the people are.”

Other Adventists who spoke during the plenary sessions included Pastor Will James from the Paradise Valley Adventist Church in San Diego, Pastor Roger Hernandez from the Southern Union Conference staff, Pastor Carlton Byrd from the Oakwood University Church, Dr. Peter Bath from Kettering Health Network in Dayton, and Pastor Ty Gibson from Storyline Adventist Church in Oregon. For a broader perspective, a number of presenters were from other Christian denominations—Noel Castellanos, director of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA); Tim Wise, a Christian activist for racial justice; Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, member of the United States Congress from Missouri; and Dr. Richard Perry, professor of urban ministry at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

In addition to the need for Adventists to live and serve in cities, three additional themes that emerged in the presentations, panel discussions and workshops were the importance of service, social justice and relationships. Regarding service, short interviews with urban pastors headlined each plenary session. Pastor David Franklin shared how the Miracle City Church in Baltimore had more than 100,000 touch points of service last year. The congregation continues to care for mothers and responded to recent flooding. Pastor Joseph Khabbaz from Sligo Church on the campus of Washington Adventist University described their work with Syrian refugees, furnishing homes and teaching English. Pastor Joseph Saint Phard of the Bolingbrook Church in Illinois emphasized the work they do for the community through the congregation’s food pantry. Pastor Michael Dauncey of Church in the Valley in Vancouver, Canada, spoke about the Acts of Kindness ministry that hosts blood drives, provides oil changes for single mothers, cooks breakfast at the local public elementary school, and does home makeovers among other services. Pastor Daniel Xisto from the Charlottesville Church told how the congregation joined other Adventist congregations in the city at the time of the recent racist demonstrations to march to the site of Heather Heyer’s murder and there had an impromptu memorial service with Heather’s mother. [1]

The theme of service as witness was developed in other presentations as well. In his plenary presentation, James described his congregation’s care for recent immigrants and refugees. The Paradise Valley Church provides mentoring, a community garden, English classes and health seminars. In workshops, Dr. Sung Kwon, director of Adventist Community Services for the denomination’s North American Division, provided training on multiple approaches to serving the community.

The root causes of poverty and other society-wide problems were also given significant attention. At least two presenters drew on Jesus’ sermon in Luke 4 as a biblical basis to work for social justice. Noel Castellanos stressed the need for both compassionate service and advocacy for justice when seeking the good of the community. A representative of LIFE Camp described how that organization has worked with civic groups and stakeholders in a number of communities to reduce violence across New York City. In other workshops, Michael Nixon (Andrews University vice president for Diversity & Inclusion) and Pastor Joshua Nelson (from Emanuel Adventist Church and member of the Adventists for Social Justice leadership team) talked about social justice. Similarly, Patricia Prasada-Rao (an Adventist who worked for CCDA in the past) shared a workshop on the need to combine advocacy for justice with more traditional community service work.

The centrality of building relationships emerged as a prominent theme. In his plenary presentation, James argued that a refugee's greatest need is a mentor. "We all need someone who genuinely cares and meets us where we are," he said. In the context of trauma, Ingrid Slikkers, social work professor at Andrews University, stated, "Programs don't heal people. People heal people." Pastor Jose Cortez, a key figure in organizing the event and associate director of the NAD Ministerial Association, added, "People loved Jesus because Jesus loved people." With a twist on the theme, Pastor Todd Stout from Church of the Advent Hope on Manhattan, called attendees to actually like, not just love, the people in the city. Prasada-Rao asked the question, "Do you know the name of someone in the community? Do you know their story?" Commenting on the ubiquity of technology, Anthony Wagener Smith, professor of Christian Ministry in the Andrews University seminary and associate director of the NAD Evangelism Institute, stressed that "technology is not a replacement for relationships." In the final two presentations, Bath emphasized the social health factors that can be improved through relationships, and Gibson spoke on the value Ellen White placed on what she called "disinterested benevolence" and he interpreted as "no-strings-attached goodness." Gibson noted the power of food to build relationships and the power of relationships to counter loneliness, which is an increasing reality for urban populations.

In his Sabbath sermon, Byrd addressed a concern that had been raised at points during the congress; because social issues are often political issues, should Adventists avoid the public sphere? He countered, "It's not politics; it's meeting human need. The Church has lost its voice," he said. "When the system treats rich people better than poor people, we must speak up!"

Prasada-Rao told Adventist Today that this congress was "a dream come true" for her. During her twenty years working for CCDA, she prayed that Adventists would engage more fully in this type of ministry.

Two participants shared with Adventist Today their motivation to attend the event. Michelle Candy is the Community Services Director in her local congregation in Bismarck, North Dakota. "We're in a small city that is starting to grow and have urban problems. We wanted to get an idea of what other churches are doing," she said. Candy found the presentation by Castellanos to be especially helpful. She also appreciated Gibson's emphasis on food for building relationships with community members. "In Bismarck, we eat!"

Krysten Thomas, a seminary student who recently moved from Orlando to Andrews University, attended the event because she wanted to "learn more about how to reach different communities and populations." She shared that she enjoyed the diversity of speakers; "Adventist and non-Adventist speakers and diversity of ethnicities as well. It challenged my perspective of how to think of people that are different from me, recognizing that everyone has their own struggles and challenges and that we are called to connect with them, especially with what Ty Gibson said of not having any agenda but just loving people," she said.

Other attendees pointed out areas they wish could be addressed when similar events are planned in the future. For example, Mark Fulop, director of Portland Adventist Community Services (PACS), noted both the racial and gender differences between the speakers and the general audience. While over the weekend there was increasing diversity on the stage, there were very few female presenters, despite women representing a significant portion of the attendees. Fulop advised, "The next conference needs to focus on our own challenges with privilege and power."

Bell's desire to host the event grew out of conversations with seminary students and pastors working in urban communities. "Two years ago, having taught urban ministry in our Doctor of Ministry program for many years and having done case studies where I went and served and worked with very neat, important urban churches across a broad range of denominational

traditions, and students telling me, 'We ought to have a congress.' Pastors out in the field saying, 'We just don't have anything focusing us on issues of the true, real city.' I then went to the seminary dean, to a few key people like the NAD Evangelism Institute and Jose Cortes," Bell said.

The NAD supported Bell's desire to host the event, so he turned to Peter Bath, vice president for Mission at Kettering Health Network. "I spent an hour and a half with him, but we were to 'yes' in five minutes," Bell shared enthusiastically. Bath was instrumental in getting other members of the Adventist health network to generously support the congress, underwriting the majority of the conference expenses.

Themes of strategy and theology naturally arise when considering urban ministry, and Bell was quick to emphasize the theological considerations over the tactical. Regarding mission strategy, Bell noted the number of people living in cities who "couldn't care less about what the Bible teaches. They don't believe in the Bible. They're not going to say, 'Oh, tell me about God.'" While Christians may be tempted to use compassion ministries as a tactic, Bell argued against this mindset. "Not everybody is as stupid as we are. Not everybody says, 'Oh they gave me something, so now I know they're Christians.'" Instead, Bell believes that urban residents will "know we are Christians when we have an on-going commitment to be alongside them, and we live, love, serve and relate with the compassion of Jesus....Then when a relationship of love and trust is built, they will say, 'You have a different world view than me.' And we listen and talk."

However, for Bell, theology is more important than strategy when considering urban ministry. He insisted, "The strategy question is important, but more important is the theology question. We don't represent the love of Christ when we do hit-and-run. We really don't. So theologically, we can't do that. We have to live in the community. We have to be a part of that community."

Bell says living in the country or the suburbs is quite appropriate if a person or family prayerfully decides this is where God wants them to live. "Praise God" for that, he said. "But the idea that we shouldn't live in the city is absolutely foreign. It's not even good study of the documents that form and shape where we typically look for answers. It's also poor theology because Jesus went to the cities and towns. That's where we are to be and live. You cannot build relationships with a hit-and-run kind of thing. You have to be incarnational, and incarnational ministry requires that you live and serve there."

Kwon, director of Adventist Community Services for the NAD, emphasized the same point. "Ellen G. White clearly counseled followers to move out of the cities. Nevertheless, in a study of 107 of her periodical articles, there are 24 instructing believers to move out of the cities or to establish institutions outside of the cities. However, the remaining 75 percent give instruction to move into cities."

Both Bell and Kwon noted the need to build relationships with people in cities and the need for congregations to serve there. Bell teaches that to be a "Christian doesn't mean gathering on the weekend with your congregation. To be Christian means to love, relate, serve, build community, listen in everyday life—on the sidewalk, in the street, in the garden, in the board room, in the school, in the place where people are." Kwon added, "The purpose of being a disciple is not only to proclaim the good news, the word of salvation, but also to demonstrate the love of God to people who are in need. This is why Ellen White said, '[The church] was organized for service.'"

This was not the first urban ministry event hosted by Adventists in North America. Some attendees remembered the 2007 Adventist Urban Congress held at Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama. Kwon described that event as a "critical moment in increasing the impact of Adventist Church community outreach ministries." He continued, "We had Adventist church

leaders urging the members to understand our duty and responsibility as disciples in the Kingdom of God.” Speakers such as Barry Black, Alvin Kibble, Charles Cheatham, Monte Sahlin, Charles Bradford, James Cress, Charles Brooks and Mark Finley “challenged the participants to pray for God’s intervention in their own lives, to listen to people’s struggles and challenges, and to look for opportunities in the neighborhoods and communities that surround us to serve and demonstrate God’s love, which reflects Jesus’ heart of servanthood,” Kwon recalled.

Commenting on what he hopes participants take away from the 2018 event, Bell listed four desires. He hopes pastors and lay people understand they are called to relate to people, to serve people, to show compassion for people over the long-term, and to build relationships with people where the connection is not only about religion. Anticipating a reaction to these priorities, Bell argues, “If some criticize that those fall short of the gospel, I would make the opposite case. One, strategically that’s a long-term way to build the church. Secondly, young Adventists are sick and tired of an institution that rests on its history and proclaims its beliefs and shows very little engagement or concern for real people in real community.” And third, “there’s joy and peace in simply living the love of Jesus among people. The call of Jesus is: follow him, live and love. So I’m not twisting arms, and I’m not forcing things. It’s like yeast in the bread; it just does its work.”

For those interested in accessing the presentations, many will be made available in various formats. The plenary presentations will be posted on YouTube. Also, plenaries and some of the workshops will be used as part of an online urban ministry curriculum hosted by the Adventist Learning Community.[2] Presentations will also be edited in order to be published in outlets such as the Journal of Adventist Mission Studies, a forthcoming BRIDGE journal, and Ministry magazine. Furthermore, Sung Kwon is working with other global divisions as well as unions within the North American Division to host similar events. Despite these resources, only those in attendance were able to network in person and to experience the special music performances by the Deliverance Mass Choir, the Andrews Korean Choir, the Andrews University String Quartet, the One Place Praise Team, Watchmen and others.

To conclude the weekend events, Bell gave a rousing appeal for attendees to embody the teachings that had been presented. Similarly, he told Adventist Today: “I dream of the day that we Seventh-day Adventists are known as people who relate, who love, who serve, who build community, who care. I dream of the day when the heartbeat of my church—the Seventh-day Adventist Church—is relationality, loving, serving, caring out in the public square, the public life. I can imagine us being that way. It can happen. We’ve got to model it. We’ve got to it. We’ve got to talk it. We’ve got to live it. We’ve got to teach it. We’ve got to do it. The actions and the words.”

[1] You can hear Daniel Xisto share this story on the Adventist Peace Radio [podcast](#).

[2] adventistlearningcommunity.com

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